

Furman Magazine

Volume 47
Issue 3 Fall 2004

Article 45

9-1-2004

Professors of note: Meritorious advising, teaching award winners for 2003-05: Ethical issues take center stage with Epright

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim '76 (2004) "Professors of note: Meritorious advising, teaching award winners for 2003-05: Ethical issues take center stage with Epright," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 3 , Article 45.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol47/iss3/45>

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Ethical issues take center stage with Epright

In the case of **Carmela Epright**, the theatre world's loss became the Furman philosophy department's gain.

As a high school student in Austin, Texas, Epright was talented enough to be cast in the roles of Antigone and Medea with a community theatre group. Her acting skills earned her a scholarship to St. Edward's University, a liberal arts school in Austin.

Only she never performed on stage at St. Edward's. Instead, her portrayals of the tragic Greek heroines ignited in her a new interest: "I took the scholarship," she says, "and studied Greek philosophy."

Still, the talents she honed as an actor — timing, nuance, artistic flair — surely come in handy in her current role as an assistant professor of philosophy at Furman, a part she has played since 1999. And her ability to capture her audience was affirmed at the 2004 Commencement when she received the Furman equivalent of an Oscar: the **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**.

Epright came to Furman from Chicago where, while pursuing her Ph.D. at Loyola University, she worked as a bioethicist for hospitals and social service agencies. She consulted with families, patients and medical personnel about issues affecting an individual's care so that together, they could make fully informed decisions.

"You never see the happy cases. You're not called in to consult about an improving patient," says Epright, who has continued her work with hospitals and hospice programs in Greenville.

Her first case at Loyola Medical Center centered on conjoined infants whose parents and physicians were at odds over whether to separate them, which would result in the death of one child and a limited lifespan for the other. The ramifications of the case extended to a host of areas — moral, medical, financial. Ultimately, LMC refused to perform the surgery but referred the parents to a Philadelphia hospital, where the twins were separated. The surviving child died within a year.

Epright uses these kinds of experiences in class. "Everything I do as a bioethicist shapes what I do in the classroom," she says. "Students see how philosophical issues have practical applications."

For students in her Medical Ethics/Medical Sociology course, which she teaches with sociology professor Kristy Maher, "practical" hits home during their daily rotations at Greenville Memorial Hospital. Several alumni of the course recommended Epright for the teaching award, praising her scintillating lectures and passion for her job.

What seemed to register most with them, though, was her support and counsel as they struggled with the complexities of different cases. Carrie Flagler '04 said, "We saw real world situations and families in the midst of tragedy. Dr. Epright truly understood the heaviness of what we were witnessing and made herself available to discuss our emotions and experiences. She asked us to talk to her about anything that bothered us . . . you could see the pain and understanding on her face."

— Jim Stewart



Power of words: O'Rourke extols study of rhetoric

A typical day in **Sean O'Rourke's** "Introduction to Rhetoric" course might begin with the professor bounding into the classroom, a sandwich in one hand and a few notes in the other.

The notes, however, will prove unnecessary. He won't need them while delivering a spirited lecture, complete with self-deprecating anecdotes and occasional pauses to moderate a heated discussion — ignited by one of his provocative comments — or to enthrall his students by reciting, from memory and in perfect cadence, an excerpt from a famous (or not so famous) speech.

The study of rhetoric may have been in decline at one time, but of late it has enjoyed an academic renaissance. And Sean Patrick O'Rourke, associate professor of communication studies at Furman, is determined to ensure that the revival won't end.

"I can't think of any subject that's more exciting," he says. "The purpose of liberal education is cultivating an informed citizenry and developing civic leaders. We govern through robust civic discourse, so more than anything we need citizens capable of understanding and responding to all forms of public address and debate. It's central to a representative democracy."

Such is the kind of passion that he brings to his work — and that helped him earn the **2004 Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**. He says, "I've had the good fortune to work with many fine, dedicated teachers here at Furman, and to be honored in this way is humbling and has recommitted me to the art of teaching."

In addition to his stimulating classroom presentations, O'Rourke encourages his students to become part of the public discourse, sending them into schools to introduce children to great speeches and orators and having them write and submit critiques of public addresses for publication. He models this kind of activity by frequently appearing as a television analyst and publishing his own opinion pieces.

Students appreciate how he walks the talk. Senior Laura Gibbs says, "I would like my life to be a reflection of his teaching. I would like to be [the kind of] civic leader that he would be proud of and that this university strives to produce."

O'Rourke's own college experience began at Humboldt State University in California, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in speech communication. Law school beckoned, but given his interest in rhetoric, oratory and public address, he chose to enroll in a joint J.D./Ph.D. program at the University of Oregon. When it came time to choose a full-time vocation, teaching won out.

One reason was parental influence; his father was a high school language teacher and administrator in Twinsburg, Ohio. More tellingly, O'Rourke says, "It had to do with the thrill you get when you have students who hardly seem interested in what you're talking about — then suddenly you see the light turn on. And you know you played a part in that transformation."

— Jim Stewart

